Political Symbolism and European Integration

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BOOK REVIEWS

Tobias Theiler, *Political Symbolism and European Integration*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. 192 pages. ISBN 0-7190-6994-7. GBP 55.

Over the last ten years Tobias Theiler has written a series of stimulating and well researched articles on European integration, focusing on European Community policies in the fields of culture, education and the audiovisual sector. He was thus particularly well placed to write this book, which considers the Community's deployment of such polices in an attempt to promote European integration and foster a sense of European identity. With the additional space a book affords he has been able to place these specific case studies within a broader theoretical framework and reveal interesting parallels in the Community's cultural, educational and audiovisual policies. A compelling picture gradually emerges of ambitious Community rhetoric that finds little, if any, reflection in the concrete measures ultimately adopted.

From the 1970s onwards, Community institutions and officials began to argue that closer public identification with "Europe" was necessary if further economic, social and political integration was to take place. Aware of the way Member States use their influence over cultural subsidies, the school curriculum, and public service broadcasting in order to foster national identity, the Community began to consider how it, too, could develop similar strategies at the European level. Initially hampered by limited competence in the 1957 EEC Treaty, the Commission nevertheless attempted to use its powers creatively to obtain leverage in these areas. Community intervention was then strengthened by amendments to the EEC Treaty (now EC Treaty) in 1992 and the inclusion of new provisions on culture and education.

Theiler suggests that there are three mechanisms by which the European Union can gain popular legitimacy. Firstly, by changing the lives of its citizens in ways they consider to be beneficial. It may, for example, improve their standard of living, or be seen to protect the environment or to guarantee peace among the Member States. Secondly, legitimization might be achieved through a gradual reconfiguring of national identities. In this instance the national identity itself comes to incorporate a European perspective. Theiler gives as examples the "efforts by Irish political elites to 'reimagine' Ireland as a mainstream European country" and "attempts by post-war West German elites to define their country as a Western democracy whose 'natural destiny' lies 'in Europe'". Thirdly, the European Union might come to be regarded as a distinct entity, a corporate actor, in its own right. Europeans would ultimately identify with this entity, seeing its preservation as important in itself, not simply as a means to achieve other utilitarian ends. Third level, entity formation, processes of legitimization are potentially the most threatening for the Member States, in that the European Union as a distinct actor could be considered a competitor for their citizen's limited stock of allegiance. Alternatively, such processes could create a further tier of identification, one that complements, rather than detracts from, national identity. Multiple identities are here stacked up like a Russian doll. In all instances, however, Theiler suggests that, for such a process to be effective, the new entity must develop its own symbols and forms of identification.

Have Community policies in the fields of culture, education and the audiovisual media helped to stimulate any of the three processes outlined above, thereby enhancing the EU's legitimacy? Theiler's study suggests that although the rhetoric employed by the Community

frequently suggests the pursuit of third level legitimization, in practice it is unlikely that Community policies have had an impact beyond the first, or at most second, levels. Although the EU has undoubtedly developed a number of institutional symbols, such as its flag, anthem, and motto, attempts by the Community to build up distinct political capital through cultural, educational or audiovisual initiatives have been systematically blocked or undermined by the Member States.

In the educational field, Commission attempts to inject a "European dimension" into the school curriculum have proved spectacularly unsuccessful. Although the data relied on by Theiler is, as he himself accepts, now rather dated, it is clear that coverage of the EU in Member State schools is extremely limited. Where there is European content, Theiler observes that it tends to be about "our country in relation to other countries in Europe" rather than about "we together with other countries/peoples as part of Europe/as Europeans". The Commission, in supporting the development of a European history textbook and books on Europe for young children, such as the ill-fated *Raspberry Ice Cream War* comic, was widely derided and accused of publishing propaganda. Faced with this opposition, the Commission refocused its policies to concentrate on initiatives that would be less controversial for the Member States, in particular, exchange schemes for schoolchildren, students and teachers.

Similar developments can be traced in the context of the Community's cultural and audiovisual policies. The new Culture 2007 programme, which will come into operation at the start of 2007, focuses heavily on promoting networks among cultural operators in Europe and facilitating the movement of cultural goods, services and workers across Member States. In the audiovisual sector, early Community attempts to support the development of a pan-European television channel, Europa TV, foundered in the face of financial difficulties and public apathy. The Community moved on to support the development of an internal market in television broadcasting and continues to provide aid, through the various MEDIA programmes, for Europe's audiovisual industries.

These case histories, beautifully mapped out, suggest that there is limited scope for the European Union to develop its own symbolic capital. Heavy handed, "top down" attempts to create a European identity are likely to be met with resistance from both Member States and their populations; while the exchanges and co-operative ventures which now feature prominently in the Community's cultural, educational and audiovisual policies do little to legitimize the Community's political institutions or shape a European identity. Ultimately, Theiler concludes that at most one might expect the EU to achieve second level legitimization, whereby membership of the EU becomes incorporated into national identities. The EU here "becomes part and parcel of national identity maintenance and an objective of national political symbolisms". Theiler recognizes that the incorporation model is not easy to grasp and this is one area of the book where further analysis would have been helpful. In particular, how does the incorporation model relate to "thin" forms of civic identification and what happens to the incorporated identity when national and European interests begin to diverge?

This is a thought-provoking and topical book. It provides both an analytical framework with which to explore identity formation in the European Union and detailed, carefully researched, studies into Community policies in the fields of culture, education and the audiovisual media. Although Theiler acknowledges that his book was "a long time in the making", it was worth waiting for. It is recommended reading for anyone interested in the evolution of the European Union, and its often troubled relationship with its Member States and citizens.

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